How could a handful of college students possibly affect the professional lives of thousands of individuals? In today’s connected world, it is easy to find examples of how a determined few can influence multitudes. But 90 years ago there were no computers to link a world together, no social media to use for issuing a call to action. Even so, a group of five undergraduate students at Davidson College in North Carolina, together with four faculty members, initiated an organization that has touched over 75,000 individuals.

On December 11, 1921, they took formal action to form an organization to recognize scholarship in physics, provide encouragement in their study of physics, and provide an association for individuals with a shared interest in physics. This is the origin of Sigma Pi Sigma, the Greek letters chosen to represent “Scholarship Physics Society.”

We can still see the influence of the early members of the Davidson chapter, even though the organization as a whole has undergone several revisions and expansions over the past 90 years. A tangible expression of the past for most members of Sigma Pi Sigma is our membership pin, shown in Figure 1.
The images used on the pin were very familiar to physics students of the 1920s but are less familiar today. The overall outline of the pin represents a standard voltmeter, a symbol of the accuracy necessary for an experimental science. It looks nothing like the outline of a digital multimeter of today. Within the body of the voltmeter we see a representation of a dynamo driving a glowing lightbulb.

The word dynamo is less familiar to today’s students, who would be more apt to identify the image as an electrical generator. By any name, it represents the creative energy needed to produce the illumination of knowledge.

The early members of Sigma Pi Sigma were more conversant with Greek, and they bequeathed a few choice samples to us. These are most often encountered in an induction ceremony.

The emblem shown in Figure 2 places a banner bearing the word “sofia” or “knowledge” across the base of the pin.

The seal of Sigma Pi Sigma shown in Figure 3 features Greek letters spelling out “phoosika,” which is easily recognized as “physics.” The lightning bolts on the seal are really just that: a dramatic illustration of electricity, a facet of nature that has been turned to practical use by the study of physics.

I am sure that many readers of Radiations recall an induction ceremony where some hapless soul would fumble through the pronunciation of the motto of Sigma Pi Sigma (see Figure 4). I was given that task for our chapter, not because of my negligible knowledge of Greek, but rather because I would mangle the words with great confidence! Since no one knew any better, my bluff was never called.

These small links to our early past as an honor organization are worth preserving and sharing, even though our perspective has shifted. By continuing to reference these symbols of the physics honor society, we honor the seminal contributions of those early members of Sigma Pi Sigma.

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